



November elections cannot be considered fully inclusive, free and fair

Discriminatory legal processes, unchecked power of the election commission and the spread of hate speech and fake news all contributing to exclusion of minority groups from the political process

YANGON, 3rd November, 2020 – Millions of ethnic and religious minorities across Myanmar are being denied the opportunity to participate in the November 8 General Election, according to an election briefing published by SMILE Myanmar in conjunction with the Heinrich Böll Foundation today. The Briefing draws on events surrounding the election as well as research conducted by SMILE and other human rights groups and INGOs working in Myanmar to paint an alarming picture of the exclusion of minorities from the political process.

“Not only are the actions of the election commission and the government an infringement on the human rights of the people of Myanmar, but they are also in direct contravention of the 2008 constitution,” said Myo Win, Executive Director of SMILE Myanmar. *“Unless all people in Myanmar are given equal right to cast their votes, this election will not be fully free, fair or inclusive.”*

The Myanmar Government and the Union Election Commission (UEC) are using laws and legal practices to discriminate against minorities – including Rohingya Muslims – based on their ethnicity, religion and citizenship status, the briefing shows. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) around the country will also face difficulties in exercising their right to vote due to ongoing conflicts and the decision of the UEC to cancel voting in several constituencies.

The briefing shows that constituents in townships in ethnic areas are being denied the right to vote and candidates from minority political parties have faced rejection despite meeting UEC criteria. It also shares an analysis of the major laws and legal processes – in particular the 1982 Citizenship Law – which are being used as mechanisms of exclusion and the outright failure of reforms which have aimed to tackle this kind of discrimination.

Finally, the briefing also underlines the potential for hate speech and fake news to interfere with the political process by targeting minority groups and deepening divides in society, and calls for accountability of the government to control and stem the spread of hate speech and disinformation over social media.

In light of the concerns raised, calls on the Myanmar Government and relevant stakeholders in the country to take a number of key actions urgently. The briefing recommends the UEC to cease all discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities and implores the international community to hold the UEC to account under its mandate to hold credible, free and fair elections. Also, the UEC must resolve issues around voting rights for National Registration Card (NRC) holders prior to the general election, and the voting rights of NIC/NRC or household list holders who reside in IDP camps should be reinstated immediately.

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This press release accompanies SMILE Myanmar’s Election briefing published on 28 October, 2020. SMILE Myanmar is a local NGO focusing on issues of religious freedom, statelessness, legal reform and local and international advocacy. SMILE’s mission is to mobilise broad support for laws and policies that protect religious minorities and to empower the diverse people of Myanmar to be change-makers.